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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: MINISTRIES OF CULTURE AND SPORTS, YOUTH, AND TOURISM RESHUFFLED

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED; NOT FOR INTERNET DISTRIBUTION.

**¶11. (U)** On January 30, President Aliyev issued a decree to establish two new ministries out of two established ministries. The Ministry of Sports, Youth, and Tourism has now become simply the Ministry of Youth and Sports. The Ministry of Culture is now the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MCT). Former Minister of Sports, Youth, and Tourism, Abulfaz Garayev, was appointed Minister of the new Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The former Minister of Culture, Polad Bulbuloglu was named Ambassador to Russia, a post that has been vacant for more than a month. The new Minister of Youth and Sports has yet to be named, although the decision is expected in the coming weeks. It is rumored the new Minister will be the son of Presidential Chief of Staff Ramiz Mehdiyev. The younger Mehdiyev currently serves as Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Youth and Sports.

BIO NOTES AND EXPECTATIONS

**¶12. (SBU)** Rumors that Bulbuloglu would be named Ambassador to Russia have circulated for weeks. Bulbuloglu, a well-known singer and composer, is close to President Aliyev and this appointment is rumored to be a reward for his orchestration of the First Lady's appointment as a UNESCO Ambassador. He has extensive contacts within the Russian cultural elite and lived with his first wife, a famous Russian singer, in Moscow for several years. His son from that first marriage and his ex-wife still reside in Moscow. He has already stated that one of his priorities will be to work to unite the Azerbaijani diaspora in Russia and make Azerbaijan's embassy a true home for them. (It is estimated that there may be as many as two million Azerbaijanis working in Russia). Bulbuloglu was not the most accessible interlocutor for the Embassy, however, and is very much an Old Guard figure.

**¶13. (SBU)** Garayev, who speaks good English, has excellent ties with the Embassy. He also comes from an artistic family and is often seen at Baku's cultural events. Garayev lacks the insights into Azerbaijan's artistic community that his predecessor had mastered, although Garayev will be familiar with his tourism portfolio from his previous position. The press has reported that Garayev's top priority will be to integrate cultural preservation into Azerbaijan's tourism development plans. His more limited cultural background may not matter: Garayev is very close to President Aliyev, dating from Aliyev's days as head of Azerbaijan's Olympic Committee. Garayev and his wife still socialize with the Aliyevs, and sources indicate their daughters are close friends as well. We have also heard, however, that the appointment was a surprise to him and that he harbors ambitions to be appointed to the more influential (and lucrative) job of Baku Mayor.

In terms of public visibility, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism is a big step up from his previous ministry for Garayev.

HARNISH